Project CAPS: Children's Adjustment to Parent Separation

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Objectives

- What do we know?
- What do we still need to know?
  - Suggest a theoretical model for understanding the impact of combat deployment.
  - Suggest importance of a developmental lens.
  - Overview of Project CAPS.
- Next steps: Impact of unresolved attachment, PTSD, and dissociation.

What do we know? Deployment risk

- 522, 692 children have at least one parent deployed in OIF/OEF
- 58% of all deployed soldiers

- Raise concerns regarding impact of parent deployment on child adjustment
  - Disrupt the care that children receive
    - deployment separation
    - destabilizing remaining caregiver and daily routines

What do we still need to know? Impact of Deployment

- Little research during periods of major military operations
  - leaves questions about impact on family and child functioning
  - obstacle to designing future interventions

- Longer and repeated deployme result in OIF/OEF having more i earlier conflicts

Theoretical perspective: Developmentally Challenging Circumstances (DCCs)

- DCCs undermine children's emotional security and have longterm consequences for adjustment (Bradley, 2007)
  - Increase need for support
  - Decrease ability to meet challenges

- Remaining parent's responsivity and behaviors predict child's adaptation
  - Better child adjustment is facilitated by:
    - Warm and responsive parenting
    - Reassuring and honest explanations regarding separation
    - Consistent family environment with re-established family roles, daily schedules,

Developmental Lens

- Adjustment has been measured only as psychopathology
  - Need to conceptualize adjustment in terms of children's achievement of developmental milestones

- Preschool years:
  - Emotion regulation
  - Self regulation
  - Early socialization skills

- Early school years
  - School adjustment
  - Peer integration
  - Friendship formation

- Failure to meet developmental milestones

Important Factors

- Child gender
  - Boys at greater risk?
  - Just manifest poor adaptation differently?
- Child age
  - Younger children at greater risk?
  - Older children at greater risk?
- Parent gender
  - Mothers vs. Fathers

Are there certain children in certain circumstances who are at greater risk for negative outcomes than others?

Father deployed

Preschool Boy	Early School Age Girl
Preschool Girl	Early School Age Boy

Mother

Preschool Boy	Early School Age Girl
Preschool Girl	Early School Age Boy

Current Study

- Examine children's achievement of developmental milestones during parent deployment

- Study differences in
  - girls vs. boys
  - preschool vs. early elementary school children
  - mother vs. father deployment

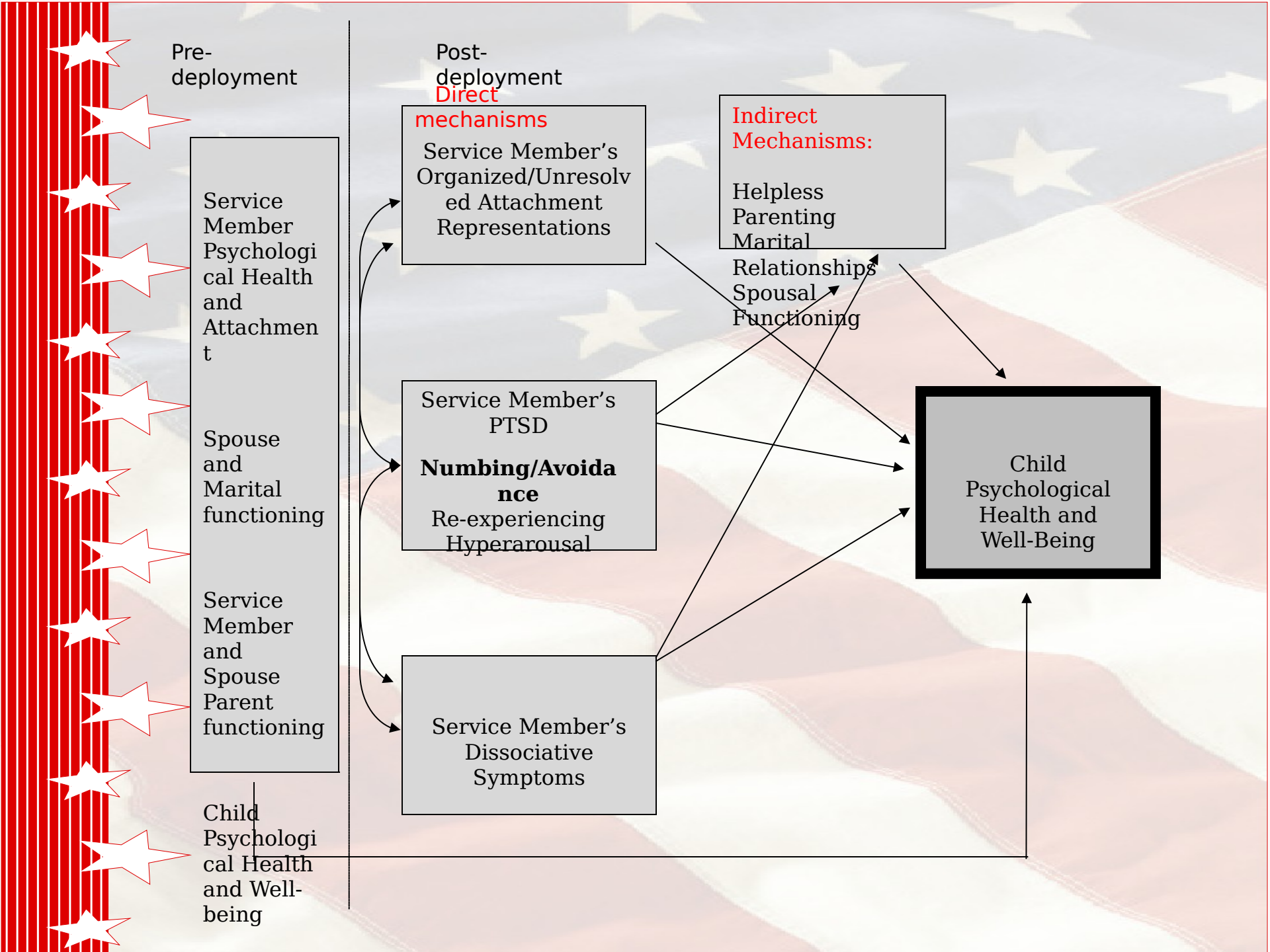
Next steps: Impact of Service Members' Symptoms Upon Return …

- Unresolved attachment representations
- PTSD
- Dissociative symptoms

Hypothesized model: Direct and Indirect Pathways

Direct paths – Service Member's symptomatolgy directly effects child

Indirect paths – Service Member's symptomatology creates changes in family context which then directly effects the child


Pre-deployment
Post-deployment
Direct mechanisms
Service Member's Organized/Unresolved Attachment Representations
Indirect Mechanisms:
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Marital Relationships
Spousal Functioning
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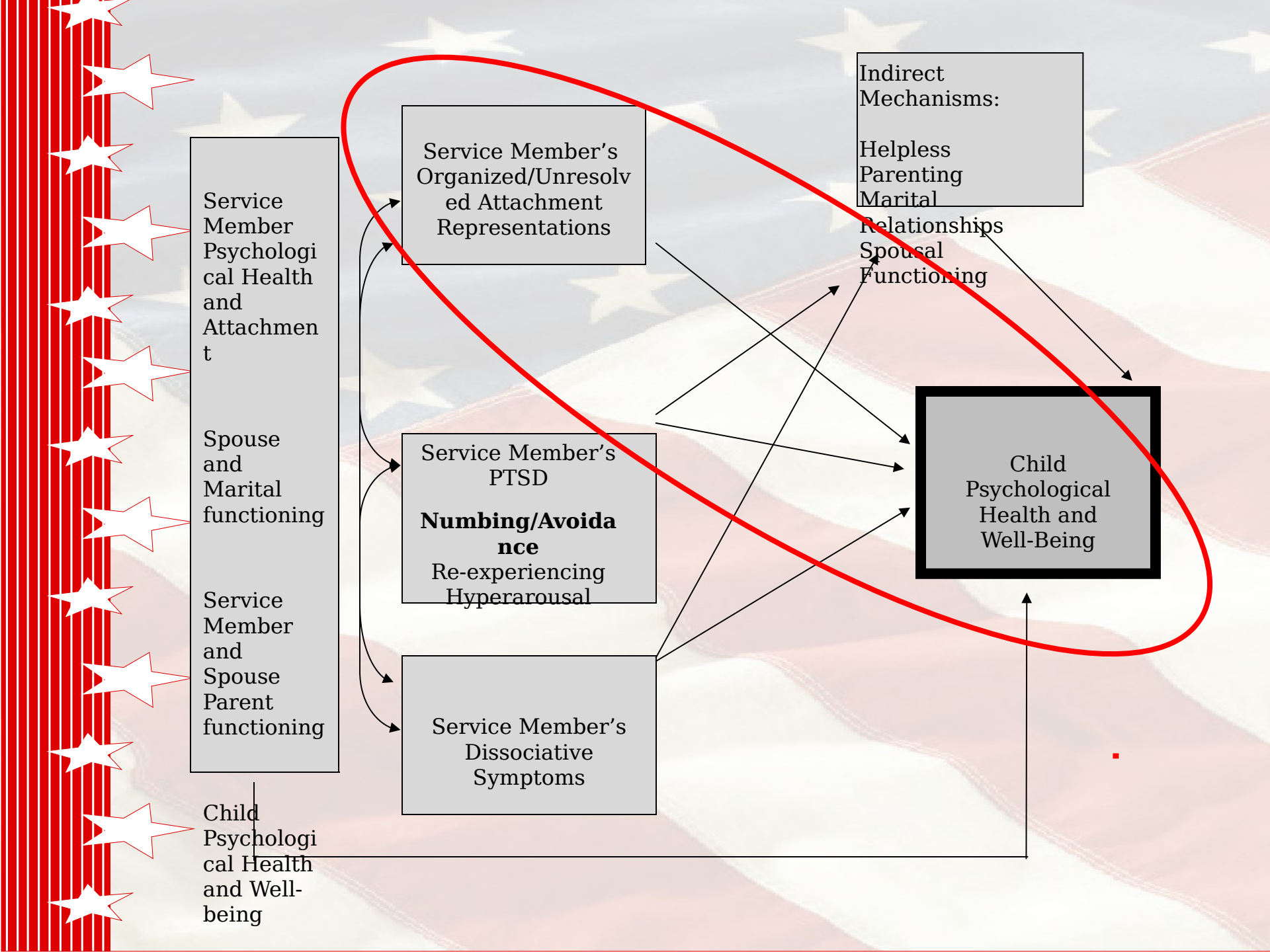
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Attachment

- Important developmental milestone is creation of a secure attachment bond with parents
  - Regulate proximity seeking and exploration (Bowlby, 1969/1982)
  - Parent's responsivity and sensitivity to children's attachment activation
  - Children's attachment experiences impact
    - How view themselves and relationships
    - How interpret and manage social and emotional information

Unresolved attachment representations

- Degree that trauma and loss have been cognitively integrated

- Typically individuals understand trauma and loss experiences and adjust accordingly

- Some individuals cope with trauma by defensively excluding the experiences and associated affect

- This segregation is a defensive coping mechanism used to manage painful experiences

Parent's Organized vs. Unresolved Attachment

- Parent's with organized attachment are responsive to children's attachment bids

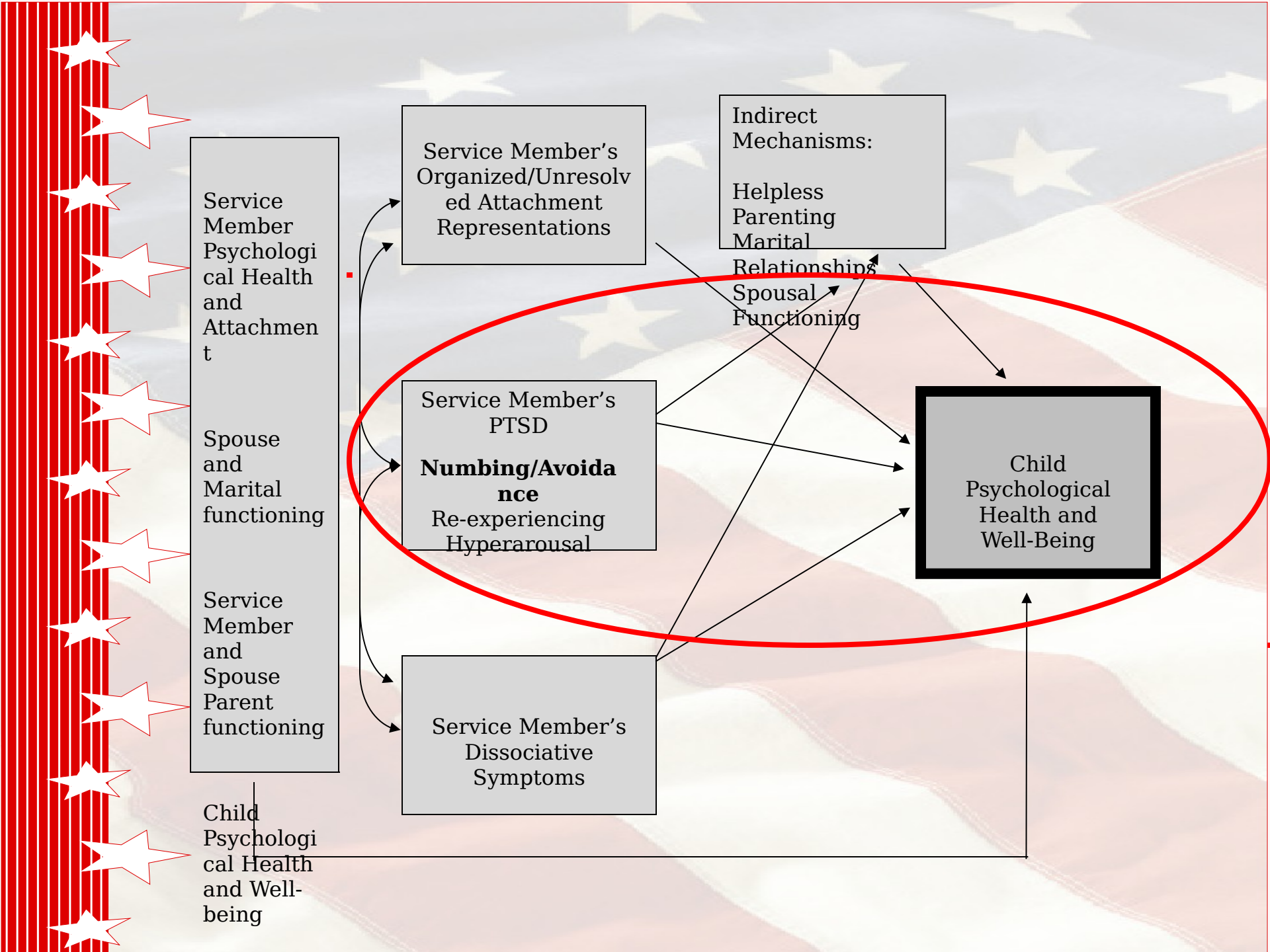
- Parent's with unresolved attachment are unresponsive to children's attachment bids or may enact behaviors that frighten their children
  - An "unresolveable paradox" - source of fear and source of protection

  - **Unresolved parent attachment leads to disorganized child attachment**
    - Affect dysregulation
    - Poor peer relations
    - Externalizing behavior problems
    - Internalizing distress
    - Self injurious behaviors

Impact of Parent PTSD and Dissociation

- In other trauma exposed populations parent PTSD leads to negative child outcomes
  - Adult children of Holocaust survivors with PTSD – children had higher rates of PTSD and other disorders
  - Lebanon War Veterans who had parents with PTSD were more likely to develop PTSD
  - Vietnam veterans with PTSD - children had more relationship difficulties, and externalizing and internalizing difficulties

- Mother's dissociative symptoms linked with dissociative symptoms in children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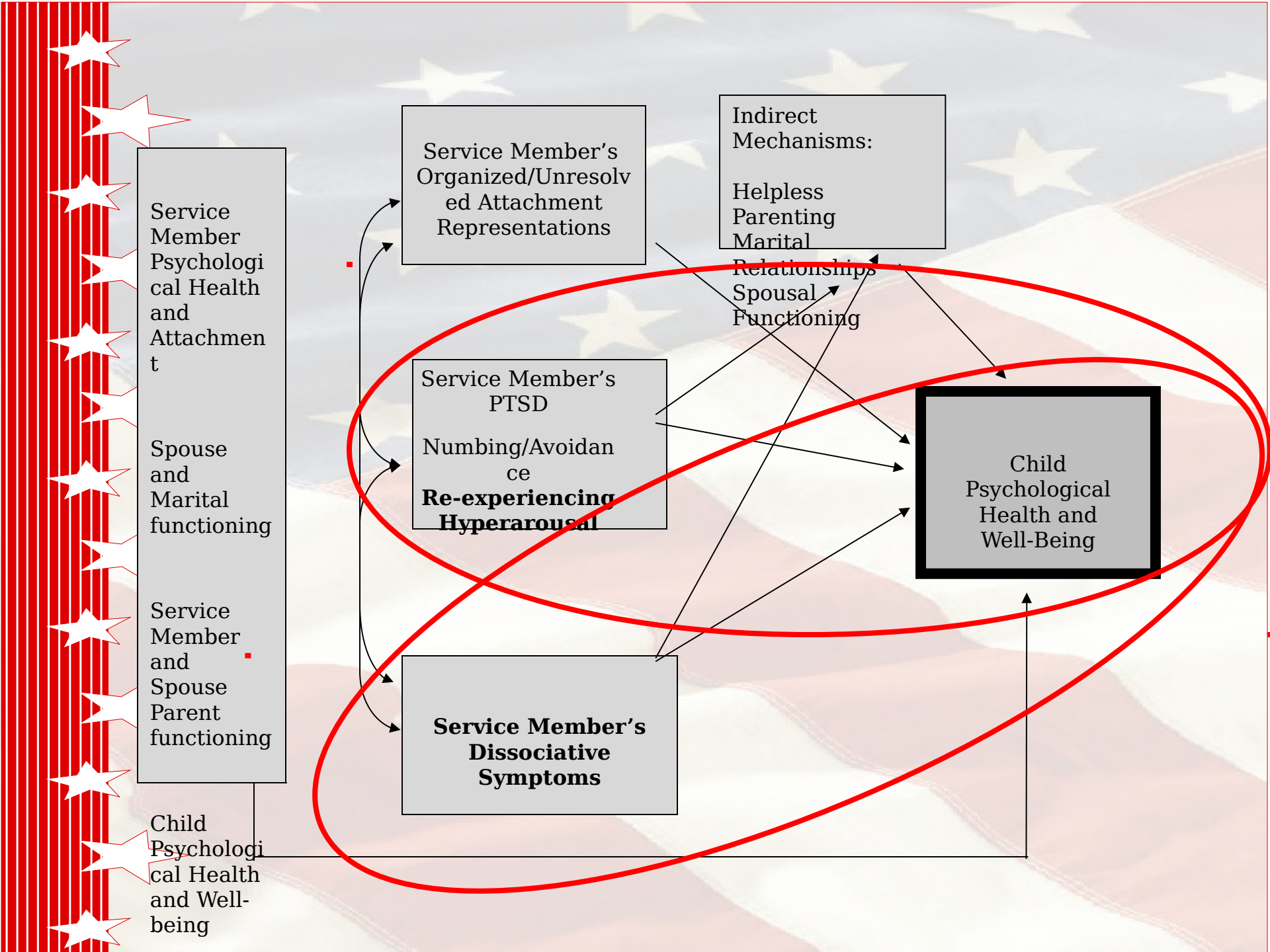
Direct Mechanism: Children's experiences of emotional unavailability

- Emotional numbing and withdrawal associated with PTSD
  - Interfere with ability to read and interpret needs and emotional experiences of child
    - Less sensitive responding
    - Minimize and invalidate child's concerns
  - Interfere with experience of positive affect and express emotion
  - Parent-child processes lay the groundwork for child emotional, self, and behavioral regulation

Numbing and Avoidance symptoms may act as obstacles to effective and emotionally responsive caregiving → disrupting children's emotional and behavioral self regulation.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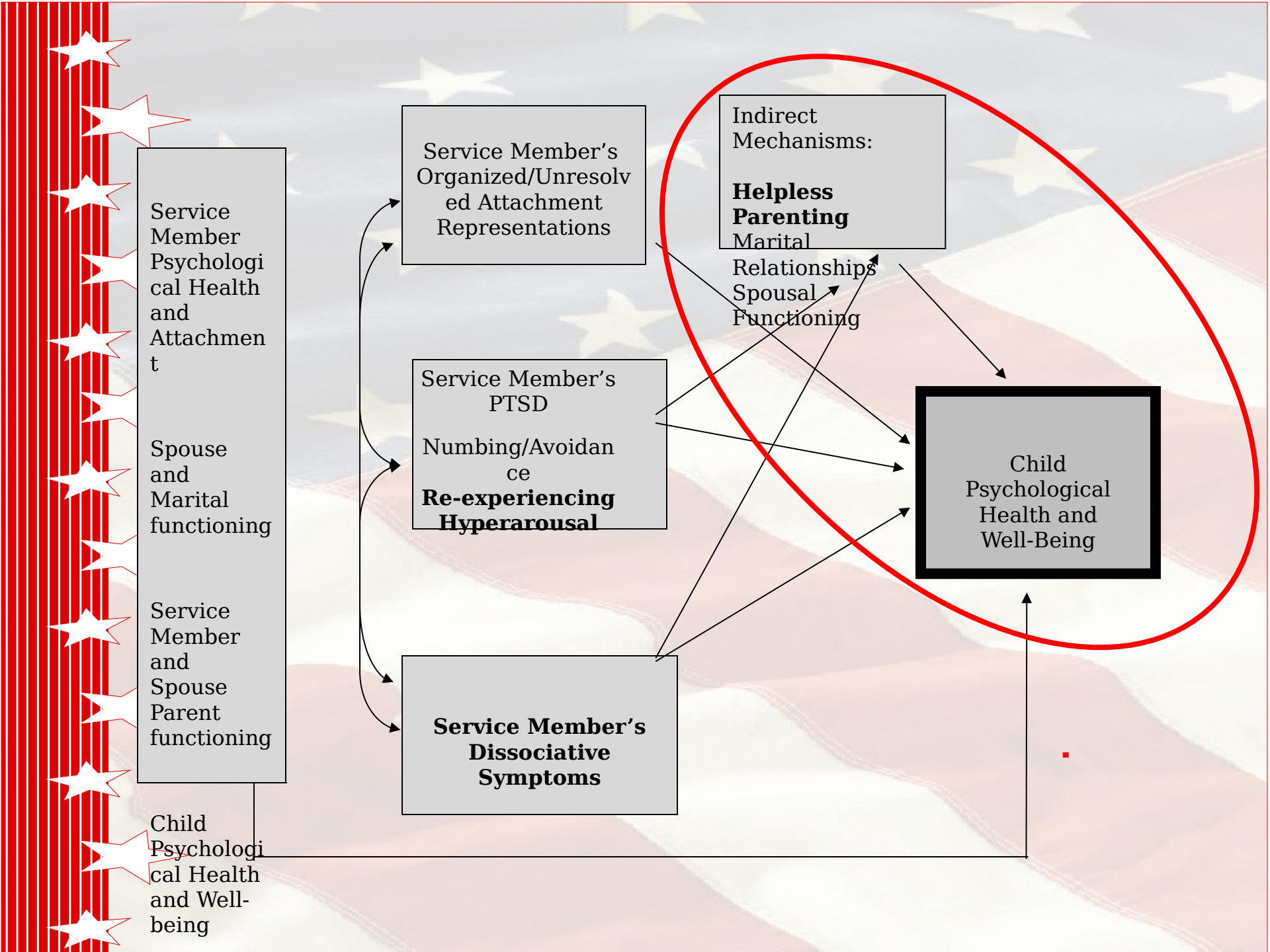
Direct Mechanism: Children's experience of fright

- Experience fright in response to the parent's re-experiencing, hyperarousal, and dissociative symptoms
  - Absorption, emotional reactions, intense recollections and memories, re-telling of events that cause fright
  - Hyperarousal including irritability, inability to tolerate negative affect, expressions of anger, and hypervigilence convey threat and confusion to child
  - Dissociative patterns of parent behavior including trance-like states, freezing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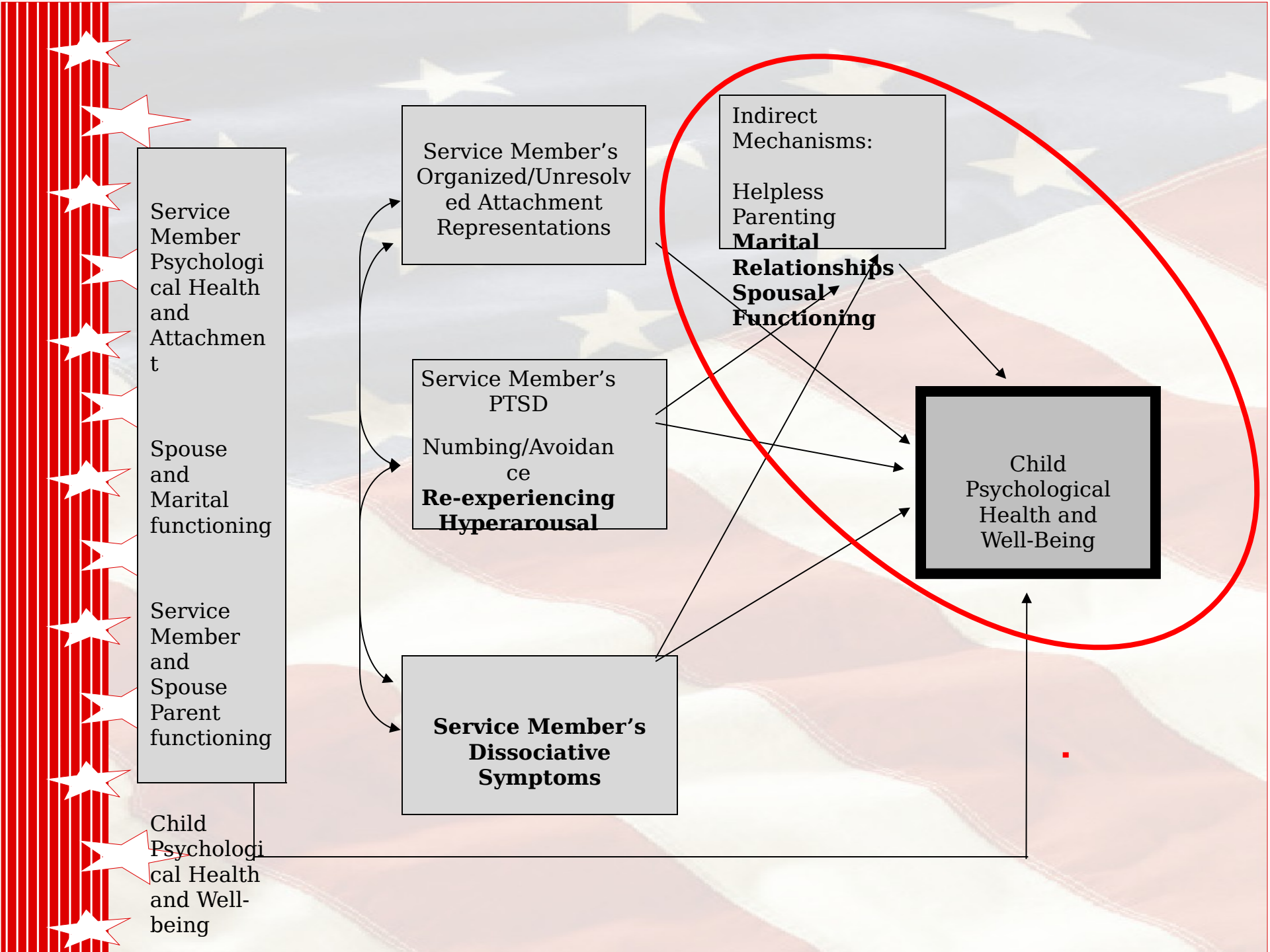
Indirect Mechanism: PTSD/Dissociation leads to dysfunctional and helpless parenting

- Increase parent distress and sense of being overwhelmed
  - Dysregulate parent's ability to provide care for children
  - Experience children as more stressful
  - Parent-child relationships marked by higher levels of dysfunction
  - Helpless to detect children's functional or emotional needs

- Leads to negative child outcomes including greater moodiness, hyperactivity, and externalizing behavior

PTSD and dissociation may also indirectly undermine child adaptation by impairing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Indirect Mechanism: Undermining marital relationships and spousal functioning

- PTSD impacts marital relationships
  - lower levels of relationship satisfaction
  - less emotional expressiveness, sociability, and self disclosure with partners
  - physical aggression in marital relationships
  - poor interpersonal problem solving

- PTSD hampers spouse functioning
  - Lower life satisfaction and demoralization
  - Heightened psychopathology
  - Impairment in social relationships

PTSD and dissociation may thwart children's adjustment and psychological health by undercutting marital and spousal functioning

Particularly Impactful for Young Children

- Vulnerable to psychological health problems in stressful contexts

- Vulnerable to parent's dissociative symptoms since reliant on parents for understanding and interpreting environment

- Reliant on parent's to scaffold development during early development

- Reliant on parents for support and guidance

- Development of skills and abilities during early childhood set stage for ability to navigate social, emotional, and behavioral situations later in childhood

Important Messages

- Believe that parent separation due to deployment may put children at risk for negative outcomes
  - Particularly given lengthy and repeated deployments
  - Need to know more about who is at particular risk.
  - Need to focus not just on psychopathology but on children's ability to meet developmental milestones.
- Future directions – what are the direct and indirect paths by which Service Members' trauma related experiences and symptoms impact child adjustment.